

The Paul-Henri and Erika Bourguignon Photographic Archives  
The Ohio State University Libraries

Haiti: Festivals - Carnival and Rara (1948)  
(from field notes)

Carnival and Rara are significant features of the Haitian annual calendar. These are periods of license and entertainment that take somewhat different forms in urban and rural environments. They have complex interaction with Catholicism and *Vodou*, with politics and sexuality, rivalry and power conflicts.

Carnival:

([PH300](#), [301](#), [302](#), [303](#), [304](#), [305](#), [306](#), [307](#), [308](#), [309](#), [310](#), [311](#), [312](#), [313](#), [314](#), [315](#), [316](#)).

In 1948, Carnival (Fr. *Carnaval*) was celebrated throughout the country, in both rural and urban areas. However, it had its major expression in the cities. Photos in this series are from Port-au-Prince. Carnival centers about the activities of individual bands or associations that are continuous over the years. A band has a master, a position which can be inherited by a son. He owns the name and the costumes and makes decisions for the group. A band also has a king, who is the principal dancer. The drummer Ti Roro ([PH234](#), [235](#), [236](#), [237](#), [238](#), [239](#), [240](#), [241](#)) is the king of a band with its center at the town of Croix des Missions, outside of Port-au-Prince. He claims that the master, who owns the costumes, orders them from New York. Some of the costumes of the kings are sold in stores in town. They are referred to as *paillettes* (sequins) and many are indeed covered with sequins. [Comment: this seems to be at the origin of the use of sequins on *vodou* flags, a practice not yet in use at the time of this study.]

Carnival bands begin to practice at the start of January, building up to public performances on Mardi Gras. Practices take place privately and in the streets every Sunday. Photos show several bands with characteristic costumes, most prominently Les Boeufs (Cr.*bef*) [the oxen] ([PH305](#), [306](#), [EH312](#)) with red and black outfits, horns above a facial mask with tongue hanging out, some with cord whips, which they swing, walking

at some distance from the other members. They also carry blown up animal bladders they whip about. They are led and directed, with a whistle, by a "king" who wears a black suit and carries a briefcase.

Another band in black outfits with widespread wings are the "werewolves" (Cr.*lou garou*). Individual members have names, such as "Lucifer" ([PH301](#)). There are several bands of Indians, with feathers, red face paint and tomahawks ([PH307](#), [308](#), [309](#)). Others wear Mexican type hats (Cr."*bolivar*") ([EH315](#)). Some bands have commercial sponsors, for instance Barbancourt rum ([EH315](#)). Some individual maskers participate independently. The teenage boy ([PH300](#)) wears a mask he made of orange and grapefruit peels.

Reportedly, on Mardi Gras afternoon, the kings of the various bands dance at the presidential palace and are given money.

In the evening things are more rowdy:

Carnival includes elements of *vodou*, but also parodies it. One group, calling itself *Société Main Fort*, in imitation of a *vodou* society, danced in a temporary tent structure, set up on one of the downtown streets, performing a mock ritual. The *hounsi* (women initiates) all were men, in women's dresses and kerchiefs.

Carnival also serves to express attitudes not openly expressed generally, such as aggression, sexual attitudes, etc. A band, roaming the streets at night with large crowds following it, called itself G.B. which could stand for *Grand Banda* (Big Ass) or *Grand Bouzin* (Big Prostitute). The King of this band wore an enormous stuffed behind. A number of cross-dressing men in the crowd solicited men. One of our acquaintances was approached by one whom he considered a particularly "nice girl." "She" turned out to be an *oungan* (*vodou* priest). On this occasion there was also a large police presence since in the past Carnival is said to have been the occasion for liquidating old feuds.

The bands fall into two groups, and are known as such, according to their sexual orientations. B.G. was known as a heterosexual group. All bands have a supernatural

protector, a *lwa* (vodou spirit). For the homosexual bands it is *Ogun Nago* (also known as St. Jacques). They are ritually protected from magical battles with other bands.

Carnival overlaps with Rara (see below) and expresses some of the same themes. However, while Rara is lower class, carnival has some middle/and upper class participation, and memories of a time when "fashionable society" had its own carnival balls, masquerades and parodies. An article in *La Rélève* by Candelon Rigaud (July 1936:23-27) "*Le carnaval d'antan*" ("old times carnival") tells of fashionable society events, including a mock marriage between two young men, where all the "bridesmaids" were cross-dressing young men. It appears that the regime of Pres. Lescot (1941-6) had banned carnival and with it the upper-class celebration. While upper-class people no longer participate in the public carnival, people get into cars to see what is going on and the presence of these cars becomes a spectacle in itself.

On Ash Wednesday, to maintain tradition, Mardi Gras costumes and especially masks are burnt—token fashion—in poor districts, such as La Saline.

Rara or Lwalwadi:

([PH317](#), [PH330](#), [331](#), [332](#), [333](#), [334](#), [335](#), [336](#), [337](#), [338](#), [339](#), [340](#), [341](#), [342](#), [343](#), [344](#), [345](#), [346](#), [347](#), [348](#), [349](#), [350](#), [351](#), [352](#)).

Rara (or Lwalwadi) follows Carnival, with activities peaking during Holy Week. There is some overlap between the two in bands and activities.

[For a detailed description and analysis of Rara, see Elizabeth A. McAlister: 2002]

Rara has its centers at Du Fort (Carrefour Bambou) on the South, between Léogane and Grand Goâve and at Ponsondé, N. of St Marc. However, there are also Rara activities in Port-au-Prince and elsewhere. Like Carnival, Rara has bands, with owners and special dances, but no costumes. The bands practice during Lent, a period when no *vodou* ceremonies are held. Bands have complex structures with kings, queens, ministers, etc. Particularly in rural areas, they engage in fights, some physical but mostly magical,

including the throwing of itching powders, made from a tropical vine (*tragia volubilis* L), called locally *pwa grate*, (Engl.: Fireman, Noseburn, Nosebleed). These vines are irritating to the skin, producing rashes and blisters. Scratching may lead to infections, potentially deadly. Powders made from the vines are believed to be potentially deadly when they have been "baptized," i.e., when they are magically treated to attack specific persons. The bands are received by richer men in the rural communities, e.g., during the pre-Easter period in 1948, in Brache, in the sugar area near Léogane, one of the local "big" men, killed an ox for the Rara.

In Port-au-Prince Rara takes different forms in public places. There is a "ribbon weaving" (Fr. *tresser ruban*) band carrying a maypole with streamers. The European meaning of the maypole and its link to the cult of the Virgin Mary is generally unknown. When they stop, the women who hold the streamers weave elaborate patterns around the pole then undo the patterns and move on. The bands stop at stores and cafés collecting money.

At Furcy, a young man, Luc ([PH470](#)) thought that Rara was carried on to produce rain: "sometimes," he said, "if it doesn't rain, they make it twice." He was particularly impressed by the various tricks: the man who can lift a table with his teeth, or the one who has snakes and has them eat rats. (There seemed to be some confusion between Mardi Gras and Carnival).

"During Rara there is a man who puts straw all over his body. He dances and he lies down at the crossroads and frightens people. Children are afraid. That's a *juif* (Judas). Also, they sometimes make statues of wood and straw, called *juif*. They dress them properly." But then L. added: "When the Mardi Gras (masks) are burned, they burn them too. When they burn everything they go to communion and confess their sins. The day after Mardi Gras they burn them, they call that *Paques* [Easter]. They do that after Mardi Gras too."

This account strikingly conflates Mardi Gras/Carnival before Ash Wednesday with Rara between Ash Wednesday and Easter, as well as Easter (*Pâques*) with Ash Wednesday.

There is Catholic communion and confession, but no awareness of a connection of the “judas” with the Crucifixion or other meanings of Easter. There is magic, as in reference to rain making. Taking these scattered elements of the festivals in which he has participated or of which he is aware, he weaves his own pattern.

While Carnival is a widespread tradition rooted in European Catholicism, Rara is uniquely Haitian.

#### References:

Elizabeth A. McAlister, *Rara!: Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and its Diaspora* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 2002).

For the European folk background of Carnival, see:  
*Carnavals et Fêtes d'Hiver* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1984).